

LAND OF THE BLIND

by

Perri Nash

Chapter One

It was the Friday morning before President's Day weekend. Cassie Marks sped down Wisconsin Avenue toward the Potomac River into a deserted Georgetown. The digital display clock on the dash of her black Sportage clicked 6:29 A.M. Rush hour had barely begun in Washington. Cassie wanted to get to the office early and use the quiet time before the stock market's Opening Bell to post the stock trades, which the four money managers had placed during yesterday's trading day. She spent her weekdays in town, but her life was in the country: a small house on a five-acre plot of land in West Virginia near Harper's Ferry, inherited from her father's aunt several years earlier. It was her true life. Four nights a week, she slept in a cozy studio apartment over a garage on a lovely old Cleveland Park property in the northwestern part of the city. On Fridays, she beat a path to the country as soon after the Closing Bell as possible. Her life was her garden and her wild animal friends. Her passion was her weaving. The hand loom was the centerpiece of her small barn where she spent numerous hours. Cassie was well-known in artists' circles for her breathtaking hanging works. Her goal was to become self-sufficient by selling her well-crafted pieces. In the meantime, she returned to the city early each Monday morning. Her weekdays were her bread and butter; her weekends were her frosted cake. She was looking forward to getting to the office early, to finishing her work on time, and to being on the road for the long holiday weekend by four P.M.

The Kia turned west onto Prospect NW and quickly turned again into the parking area at the front of a townhouse. Before its conversion to an office building, the three-story Federal with cream stucco façade had a manicured front lawn bordered by a wrought iron fence. With parking at a premium in Georgetown, elegance gave way to practicality. Cassie unfolded her long, lithe legs out of the car, reached her hand to the back of her head to check her shiny, auburn hair (pierced by single strands of gray and twisted securely around two red lacquered chopsticks), and locked the car door.

The Victorian glass bead hairpins topped her eclectic work costume of black Cossack boots, multicolored Indian vest, and crisp white Oxford shirt over black silk culottes covered by a very well-worn man's Chesterfield. Cassie was very good at her job, and she was given allowances for eccentricities. She refused to wear the accepted Wall Street uniform for men and women: the two-piece suit. As she approached the building, Cassie's boots crunched across the gravel parking area of the February morning's early light. The air was cold and crisp as she inhaled the city smell caught in her nostrils. Her

eyes wandered across the front yard of Conner, Honeycutt, Inc. Long necks, cigarette butts, and a couple of used condoms littered the yard—results of the previous night’s activities. Georgetown led a schizophrenic life between its former posh existence as an upscale residential neighborhood during the sixties and its current reality survival by commerce, both retail and service. Each night, the remaining residents scrambled for the limited parking spaces, locked themselves into their quiet townhouses, and left the sidewalks to the party people. Each morning, with the partiers back to the suburbs, the residents abandoned their neighborhood to the business people who arrived to conduct the day’s commerce. Georgetown never slept. It simply changed shifts.

The old house was bought by Lloyd Honeycutt in the fifties from a former paramour who had fallen on hard times. He renovated the house and soon found that the property served handsomely as the center of his growing financial empire, especially during the early years of interest in Georgetown, in the Kennedy era.

At the entranceway, Cassie stepped quickly up the demi-flight of stairs. Before she placed her key in the door, she sensed something was not quite right. The newspapers, rolled and sleeved in plastic, were scattered on the concrete just outside the entrance. She glanced back over her shoulder into the parking area and was re-assured to see Gregg’s black Ford pick-up parked in its usual spot. She moved into the hallway.

The hall lights were on, and the building was warm, but still. The thermostat had been turned up. The very early morning sun was just beginning to shine, dappling light through the nude tree branches in the backyard and into the undraped windows. Cassie immediately noticed that there were fresh scuffs and scratches at the top of the stairs leading to the basement.

Gregg Hudson, a third year finance major at Georgetown University, worked part-time for Conner, Honeycutt as the firm’s “guy Friday,” doing everything from handyman to occasional gofer. In addition to a minimum wage salary, he also received firsthand exposure to the heady world of investment management. He frequently arrived before dawn to do a few chores and to read research reports and analyze various companies and their financial viability in the marketplace. It was from these that the portfolio managers began to form opinions about whether to buy or sell a particular stock. Sometimes Gregg was even invited to sit in, and listen, when the managers participated in conference calls with the investor relations people at these firms. He wanted to learn from the best. It was expected that upon graduation, Gregg would be offered a position with the firm. The firm’s owner, Lee Connor, liked to think of himself as a mentor, and

he was grooming Gregg for future greatness in money management.

Cassie proceeded down the hallway toward the back of the building to her office. The old house adapted well to an office layout. The building's walls had been peeled to expose brick, carpet removed to reveal random plank wood floors, and the Anderson windows, no longer draped, gave the room a light, airy feel, particularly with the high white ceilings.

A few well-placed rented Ficus trees and lighted contemporary oil paintings gave the place style. The main floor was a long center hall from front to back with sitting room, formal parlor, and dining room now sub-divided into offices for two of the four managers, their assistants, research library, and the back office. The back office and trading desk was centralized as it was truly the hub of the company. The bedrooms and sitting rooms upstairs had become the offices and the conference room for the remaining two senior managers, their assistants, and the marketing people. A full kitchen remained on the ground floor, which opened onto the rear, walled courtyard where tables and chairs were arranged for the employees to eat al fresca in nice weather. The old laundry and ironing rooms were now the administrative offices for bookkeeping and the office manager.

As Trading Manager for the investment advisory firm, Cassie placed all the securities transactions with various brokerage firms and trading houses on behalf of the portfolio managers. Located in an adjacent office, formerly the serving pantry, were two desks for her staff. Two young women processed all the executed trades and handled the daily administration of the client accounts, which were physically maintained at a dozen custodian banks around the country.

After dropping her purse and briefcase in her desk chair and throwing off her coat, Cassie checked the overnight data feeds at the computers in her office. This information updated yesterday's closing stock prices to the portfolios maintained on the company's in-house computer system and also matched trades with the DTC, an online clearing system used nationally to settle trades between brokers, banks and managers. It was all done electronically. She also verified the overnight back-up of the in-house computer systems and then proceeded downstairs to the kitchen and the fresh hazelnut coffee she knew Gregg would have brewed when he arrived about six A.M.

At the bottom of the staircase, Cassie turned left toward the kitchen, but it was dark. She put a hand inside the door frame to reach for the light switch, and her foot touched

something. She hesitated, her mind processed all that had been out of sync since she arrived at work, but in that split second, her finger touched the switch and illuminated the room. The room appeared as though seen through a kaleidoscope, the bright angles of red smeared everywhere on the white walls, kitchen cabinets, and floor. Chairs were flung sideways. The glass coffeepot had been shattered, and its fragments sparkled from the overhead lights, which reflected another dimension of primary colors to the scene. Curled on the floor next to the overturned table was a man with his white shirt and navy Dockers soaked in blood, sticking to his body. Cassie's hands went to her face, and she turned away. Tears sprung to her eyes as she turned back again and moved through the mayhem toward the man. Instinctively, she knew it was Gregg and he was dead, but her conscious mind needed validation. Cassie placed a trembling hand gently on his shoulder. The body shifted at the touch and rolled on its back, its left arm flopping across her leg and falling between her feet. The scream came from somewhere inside her, but she couldn't identify its source. She wanted to drop to her knees and cradle Gregg, but she also wanted to run away and forget the expression of death on his face. Too late, Cassie realized she must leave the room and not touch anything. She wanted to put her hand out to steady her retreat, but fear of touching anything stopped her. Her shaky legs got her up the stairs to the phone on the assistant's desk outside Abe Schwartz's office.

"9-1-1, what type of emergency?" The woman's voice seemed crisp and businesslike, and Cassie very much needed someone else to take charge right now.

"Ah... I want to...no, I need to...report a, a...death." Cassie was swallowing sobs. She was not going to get hysterical, at least not yet.

The dispatcher's voice came back at her: "Tell me what happened. Police or medical? Do you need help?"

Cassie felt that the room was turning watery as she looked out to the walled garden behind the townhouse. "Yes!" she screamed into the phone. "Gregg, a man, he was..." she whispered the word because she didn't want to say out loud "...murdered." Saying it made it a fact.

Once more she heard the woman's voice on the other end of the phone: "Are you alone?" No response. Cassie hadn't thought that someone might still be in the building.

"Stay on the line; police are on the way." Cassie held the receiver like her life

depended on its connection to her hand. Minutes later, when Officer Jefferson arrived on the scene dispatched from the Third Precinct, she still clutched the handset so fiercely that he had to pry it from her fingers to release the dispatcher from the call. Then Cassie began to sob.
